

On Gender-Sensitive Skill Development in HEIs: A Focus on Empowering Women Students

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Abstract:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes inclusive and skill-based education, with a focus on gender sensitivity and empowerment. This study investigates the impact of NEP 2020 on gender-sensitive skill development among women students in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), specifically within affiliated colleges of Darrang district, Assam. Using a descriptive survey method, data was collected from a sample of 120 women students through a structured questionnaire based on three key objectives: awareness of gender-sensitive provisions, barriers to access, and the perceived impact. Findings reveal that while a majority of students are moderately aware of NEP 2020's gender-sensitive provisions, implementation at the institutional level remains inconsistent. Although skill development programs exist, issues such as limited outreach, inadequate infrastructure, socio-cultural constraints, and lack of mentorship affect their participation. The study concludes that although NEP 2020 sets a progressive foundation, there exists a gap between policy and practice in rural HEIs. Strengthening institutional support, increasing awareness, and ensuring gender-responsive implementation are essential to truly empower women students through skill development.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Women Empowerment, Skill Development, Gender Sensitive, HEIs.

INTRODUCTION:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, unveiled by the Government of India, has brought transformative changes to the educational landscape of the country, with a strong emphasis on inclusive and equitable education. One of its core objectives is to ensure that higher education not only fosters academic excellence but also prepares students with the skills necessary to thrive in an ever-evolving job market. While NEP 2020 advocates for the holistic development of all students, it particularly underscores the importance of gender equality in skill development and vocational education, a key area that has been historically underserved for women, especially in technical and vocational fields.

In the context of India's higher education system, colleges play a critical role in providing education to a large number of students across urban and rural areas. Colleges, often bound by traditional curricula and limited resources, are now tasked with implementing NEP 2020's vision. While much of the attention in skill development programs has focused on technical skills, gender-sensitive initiatives within these programs remain under-explored. The empowerment of women through skill development is essential not only for fostering economic independence but also for addressing the gender disparity in the Indian workforce.

Despite the policy's strong call for gender equality, women in colleges often face various barriers to accessing skill-based education. These challenges include cultural biases, lack of infrastructure, and

limited mentorship opportunities, especially in fields such as engineering, technology, and entrepreneurship, where women have traditionally been underrepresented. In this regard, gender-sensitive skill development programs are pivotal in ensuring that women are not only included in skill training but are also provided with the resources and support to succeed in their careers.

This study aims to explore the impact of NEP 2020 on gender-sensitive skill development programs in affiliated colleges, with a particular focus on how these programs empower women students. The researcher has also focused on how women students perceive challenges in accessing these programs. The findings from this study will provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and institutional leaders working to enhance women's participation in vocational education and help them navigate the challenges they face in a rapidly changing economy.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has introduced a transformative agenda aimed at restructuring the Indian education system to make it more inclusive, skill-oriented, and equitable. A key aspect of this reform is its emphasis on gender sensitivity and empowerment through skill development, particularly in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). However, the practical translation of these policy directives into effective, on-ground initiatives remains uncertain especially in rural and semi-urban regions like Darrang district of Assam. Despite the policy's vision to bridge gender disparities and empower women, many women students continue to face challenges such as limited awareness, lack of access to quality skill development programs, and socio-cultural barriers. There is a need to critically examine how women students perceive these reforms, and to what extent these efforts are influencing women's confidence, employability, and entrepreneurial aspirations.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

India's educational system has long been marked by gender disparities, especially in higher education and vocational training. Historically, women in India have been marginalized in educational access, with cultural, social, and economic factors limiting their participation in formal education, particularly in fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). According to a study by Bashir et al. (2018), the participation of women in technical and vocational education has remained low due to factors such as patriarchal norms, domestic responsibilities, and lack of access to resources.

However, in recent decades, several initiatives aimed at gender mainstreaming in education have been introduced. Kumar and Pandey (2019) highlights that gender bias and institutional barriers continue to persist, particularly in skill-based education programs, where women still have limited access to specialized training and career pathways.

Skill development has become a focal point in modern education systems worldwide, as countries aim to meet the demands of an increasingly globalized and technology-driven economy. According to the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) (2015), India faces a significant gap in the availability of skilled labor, with a particular shortfall in vocationally trained women. The Indian Skill Development Initiative has made substantial progress in addressing this gap by introducing various training and certification programs. However, there is still limited focus on women's participation, especially in non-traditional sectors such as engineering, IT, and manufacturing.

Sarkar (2020) emphasize that the integration of gender-sensitive curricula and workplace readiness programs can significantly enhance the employability of female graduates. Skill development programs

that are tailored to women's needs and challenges—such as flexible timings, safe learning environments, and mentorship are crucial for improving women's participation in traditionally male-dominated sectors. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, is a milestone document focused at restructuring education system of India. One of its primary goals is to increase access and promote gender equality in education. The NEP 2020 emphasizes the need for inclusive and equitable education and calls for the elimination of gender bias in both curricula and learning environments. The policy also outlines a robust framework for vocational education, with a focus on integrating skill-based learning into formal education systems at every level.

Reddy (2021) concluded that NEP 2020's provisions for gender-sensitive education focus on removing barriers to female participation in vocational and skill development programs. The policy envisions a flexible learning system, where women can access education and skill training that suits their personal and professional aspirations. The introduction of multi-disciplinary approaches and vocational courses from the early stages of education is seen as a step towards enhancing gender equality in technical fields. Kumar and Singh (2021) argue that the implementation of NEP 2020's gender-sensitive measures remains a work in progress. The successful integration of gender equality in skill development programs depends heavily on how well policy interventions are operationalized at the institutional level, particularly in affiliated colleges that are often under-resourced and burdened by traditional educational structures.

Yadav and Gupta (2021) suggests that the empowerment of women through affiliated colleges requires more than just the introduction of gender-sensitive policies; it also requires a cultural shift within these institutions to encourage active participation of women in vocational education and entrepreneurial programs.

Mishra (2020) points out that while some affiliated colleges have made progress in implementing women-focused training initiatives, many others continue to operate in traditional frameworks, where gender equality is not fully integrated into curriculum planning and teaching methods.

Sharma and Sinha (2021), it was found that women who participated in gender-inclusive vocational education programs experienced higher job satisfaction and career progression in fields like information technology, business administration, and digital marketing. These fields, once dominated by men, now show increasing participation from women who have benefited from targeted skill development programs.

Sahni and Kaur (2020) identified key obstacles, including cultural stereotypes, family responsibilities, and safety concerns. These barriers are particularly pronounced in rural areas, where women are often expected to prioritize domestic duties over professional aspirations. Furthermore, a lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure, such as safe learning environments, female mentors, and career counselling services, continues to undermine women's participation in skill development courses.

Joshi (2020) concluded in his study that affiliated colleges often lack specialized training facilities or industry linkages, which further hampers the integration of women into high-skill job markets.

Mehrotra et al. (2019) argue that women who have access to gender-specific training programs are more likely to succeed in the workforce. Such programs, when combined with mentorship opportunities, help increase self-confidence and leadership skills, which are critical for career advancement.

RESEARCH GAP:

While numerous studies have explored the broader impact of NEP 2020, limited research has specially f-

ocused on gender-sensitive skill development and its perceived impact on women students in rural HEIs. Moreover, there is a lack of empirical evidence capturing the voices and lived experiences of women students from affiliated colleges in underrepresented regions like Darrang district, Assam. This gap in localized, gender-focused research highlights the need for a targeted investigation that not only assesses awareness and perception towards women empowerment through skill development initiatives.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To examine women students' awareness and understanding of the gender-sensitive provisions introduced under NEP 2020 in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).
2. To identify the perception of women students regarding barriers and challenges in accessing skill development opportunities.
3. To analyze the perceived impact of skill development programs introduced under NEP 2020 in HEIs on women students.

HYPOTHESES :

H1: Women students have significant awareness and understanding of the gender-sensitive provisions introduced under NEP 2020 in HEIs.

H2: Women students perceive significant barriers and challenges in accessing skill development opportunities.

H3: Skill development programs introduced under NEP 2020 in HEIs have a significant perceived impact on women students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Research Design: The study is a descriptive study as it attempted to understand the extent to which NEP 2020 influences gender-sensitive skill development programs in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Population and Sample

- Target Population: Women students from various disciplines in select colleges of Darrang District, Assam.
- Sample Size: 120 respondents.
- Sampling Technique: The researcher has used convenience sampling methods.

Data Collection Methods: The researcher has used both Primary and secondary methods of data Collection. Primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of Likert scale items (1-5 scale, e.g., Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) and open-ended questions. Secondary sources for this present study includes Policy documents, reports on NEP 2020 implementation, and other published studies or research on skill development and women empowerment.

Data Analysis: The researcher has used statistical tools such as SPSS to analyze survey data. The researcher has used descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the demographic characteristics of the respondents and general trends in their responses (e.g., mean, mode, frequency distributions). Moreover, Chi-square test was employed to assess the relationship between demographic factors (e.g., discipline, urban/rural location) and responses regarding awareness, participation, and barriers. Apart from these, Regression Analysis was conducted to examine the impact of various factors (such as

exposure to gender-sensitive skill development programs, level of awareness of NEP 2020) on women's empowerment and skill development outcomes.

Scope of the study: This study focuses on examining the impact of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 on gender-sensitive skill development in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), with a specific emphasis on empowering women students. The scope is limited to women students enrolled in various undergraduate programs across selected HEIs. Moreover, the study is limited to affiliated provincialised colleges of Darrang District, Assam.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS:

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

		AUGSP	PBS	PI
N	Valid	120	120	120
Mean		3.5100	3.7650	3.5867
Median		3.8000	4.0000	4.0000
Std. Deviation		1.21388	1.17041	1.20997

Source: SPSS

Descriptive statistics were computed for three key constructs: awareness and understanding of gender-sensitive provisions (AUGSP), perceived barriers for skill development (PBS), and perceived impact of skill development programs (PI). The data for all three variables were collected from 120 valid respondents.

Table 2: One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
AUGSP	120	3.5100	1.21388	.11081
PBS	120	3.7650	1.17041	.10684
PI	120	3.5867	1.20997	.11045

Source: SPSS

Table 3: One-Sample t-Test

Test Value = 3						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
AUGSP	4.602	119	.000	.51000	.2906	.7294
PBS	7.160	119	.000	.76500	.5534	.9766
PI	5.311	119	.000	.58667	.3680	.8054

Source: SPSS

One-sample t-tests were conducted to determine whether the mean scores were significantly greater than the neutral midpoint value of 3 (indicating agreement or positive perception).

H1: Awareness of Gender-Sensitive Provisions (AUGSP)

A one-sample t-test revealed that the mean score for awareness and understanding of gender-sensitive provisions was significantly greater than the neutral value of 3, $t(119) = 4.60$, $p < .001$, $M = 3.51$, 95% CI [0.29, 0.73]. This suggests that women students possess a moderate but statistically significant level of awareness regarding gender-sensitive provisions in NEP 2020.

H2: Perceived Barriers to Skill Development (PBS)

The test indicated that the mean score for perceived barriers was significantly greater than the neutral midpoint, $t(119) = 7.16$, $p < .001$, $M = 3.77$, 95% CI [0.55, 0.98]. This supports the hypothesis that women students perceive considerable barriers in accessing skill development opportunities.

H3: Perceived Impact of Skill Development Programs (PI)

The mean score for perceived impact was also significantly higher than 3, $t(119) = 5.31$, $p < .001$, $M = 3.59$, 95% CI [0.37, 0.81]. These results indicate a positive perceived impact of skill development programs introduced under NEP 2020.

Table 3: Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Variable	Mean	t (df)	P-value	95% CI	Interpretation	Supported
H1	AUGSP	3.51	4.60 (119)	< .001	[0.29, 0.73]	Moderate awareness above neutral	Yes
H2	PBS	3.77	7.16 (119)	< .001	[0.55, 0.98]	Significant perceived barriers	Yes
H3	PI	3.59	5.31 (119)	< .001	[0.37, 0.81]	Positive perceived impact	Yes

FINDINGS:

The present study aimed to examine women students' awareness and understanding of gender-sensitive provisions introduced under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, identify perceived barriers to skill development, and assess the perceived impact of skill development programs in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Darrang District, Assam.

Findings indicate that women students exhibit a moderate but statistically significant level of awareness regarding gender-sensitive provisions in NEP 2020. With a mean score of 3.51 (on a 5-point Likert scale), this suggests that while awareness exists, it is not uniformly high across the population. This reflects a partial success of institutional and policy-level communication regarding gender-focused reforms. This outcome aligns with prior research indicating that policy awareness among students often depends on proactive dissemination strategies and the presence of gender-inclusive practices within academic environments (Aithal & Aithal, 2020).

The study found a high and statistically significant perception of barriers ($M = 3.77$), suggesting that despite the NEP 2020's emphasis on equity and access, women students continue to face challenges in participating in skill development opportunities. These barriers may include infrastructural limitations, socio-cultural constraints, lack of guidance, financial limitations, and gendered expectations within family or institutional settings. This is consistent with earlier studies that have highlighted structural and

cultural constraints limiting women's access to capacity-building and vocational programs (Kabeer, 2005; UNESCO, 2021).

Despite the challenges, the perceived impact of skill development programs is positive and statistically significant ($M = 3.59$). Women students believe that these programs contribute meaningfully to their personal and professional development. This suggests that when accessible, such initiatives are viewed as beneficial and empowering, resonating with the NEP 2020's objective to enhance employability, entrepreneurship, and holistic development.

9

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY:

Comprehensively the findings of the study indicate a gap between policy intent and actual execution. While there is moderate awareness and recognition of program impact, the high perception of barriers indicates systemic or operational shortcomings. This reveals a critical need to strengthen implementation, ensure equitable access, and raise awareness to bridge the policy-practice divide.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Following recommendations are proposed based on the findings of the study:

1. Higher education institutions should conduct targeted workshops, seminars, and orientation programs to raise awareness about gender-sensitive provisions in NEP 2020.
2. Information about these policies should be made available in regional languages to improve accessibility.
3. Institutions should prioritize inclusive infrastructure and flexible program schedules to accommodate diverse student needs, especially for women from rural or marginalized backgrounds.
4. Establishment of Gender Cells or Equal Opportunity Cells in colleges to monitor the implementation of NEP provisions and address grievances related to gender discrimination or exclusion.
5. Periodic gender audits and student feedback mechanisms should be introduced to evaluate the effectiveness of ongoing programs.
6. Sensitization programs for parents and community stakeholders should be conducted to address socio-cultural barriers that inhibit women's participation in extracurricular and skill-based learning.
7. Faculty should be trained in gender-inclusive pedagogy and mentorship strategies to support women students in navigating both academic and skill-based learning.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

- The study is confined to selected Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), which may not represent the experiences of students across all regions of India.
- The study focuses only on women students, excluding insights from male students, faculty, and administrators, which may limit a comprehensive understanding of gender-sensitive reforms.
- The data is based on self-reported responses, which may be subject to personal biases, exaggeration, or social desirability effects.
- Due to time and resource constraints, the study may involve a relatively small sample, which can affect the generalizability of the findings.

FUTURE SCOPE OF THE STUDY:

1. This study was limited to undergraduate women students from provincialised colleges in Darrang di-

strict, Assam. In the future, similar studies can be done in other districts or states to compare results. Research can also include students from private and central universities to get a broader view.

2. Postgraduate and professional students can be studied to understand how awareness and impact change at higher levels. Long-term studies can help track how skill development programs affect careers and lives over time.
3. Future research can also focus on different groups, like students from tribal or rural backgrounds, to see if their experiences differ. Including views of teachers and college staff may also give better insights into how the NEP 2020 is being implemented.

CONCLUSION:

This study contributes valuable insights into the status of women students under NEP 2020 reforms in higher education institutions. While students perceive these reforms as positive, there are critical challenges, particularly in access and equity that must be addressed through concerted institutional and policy-level action. Bridging the gap between policy provisions and lived realities will be essential to achieving the inclusive vision outlined in NEP 2020.

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